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Expanding the Canon Plus Two

Lesson Plan—Elements of Literature (plot, character, setting, theme) using short pieces

I teach reading skills classes so the focus is on improving skills using a required program such as SRA or the Rewards program. Students are also in a regular English class which requires book reports/project so what I do in reading class should support the English class literature component. I am limited this coming year because the reading skills will only meet twice per week (I am not sure of the class length since we have a new schedule).

This lesson plan will use short fiction such as short stories, folktales, or fables. There are some very short pieces in the 7th and 8th grade literature anthologies—some are less than a page—that I think would work quite well for this lesson plan. Students could also use a story they are familiar with such as a fairytale (Goldilocks and the Three Bears, for example) or a popular movie. If it goes well, I would like to use a “chapter book”, such as “Revolution is not a Dinner Party” (by Ying Yang Compestine) with the same ideas for working with the literary elements.

**Introductory to Literary Elements:**

Materials: Paper for each group, pens/pencils, copies of student note guide.

Student outcomes:

* I can list the literary elements and give a short definition of each
* I can identify the literary elements in a short piece of fiction (folk tale, fable, nursery rhyme)

Mini-Lesson #1: Give table groups (2-3 students) a small piece of paper and ask them to write down: whatever they know about a story, its parts, the literary elements. This probably won’t take more than a minute or two. Give them lots of synonyms to jog their memories! What you are looking for is: plot, character, setting, and theme. Have the groups share what they discussed/wrote down with the class using the document camera. If you don’t have a document camera, use larger pieces of paper. Discuss all of what the groups put down but focus on what can be considered the literary elements (since they may not have the exact terminology).

Mini-Lesson #2: Have note guide ready for definitions. Revisit the notes and ideas from Mini-Lesson #1 as you have them fill out the note guide. Whenever you have a chance, have them chant: plot, characters, setting, theme, plot characters, setting, theme, etc. Soon they will have it memorized and if you repeat this activity over the semester or year, they will ALWAYS know the elements of literature!

**Teaching and Practice for the Literary Elements:**

Student Outcomes:

* I can draw a plot line, showing the exposition (basic situation), sequence of events, high point (climax), and conclusion for a short story or folk tale.
* I can describe the traits of a character in a short story or folk tale.
* I can predict what behavior might be expected from the characters based on their traits.
* I can describe the setting for a short story or folk tale.
* I can say why the setting works for the plot of the story.
* I can predict how the plot would be different with a different setting.
* I can state the basic theme for a short story or folk tale.
* I can predict the plot of a story based on a different theme.

Mini-lesson overview: For each of the literary elements, have one or more short pieces selected. You can have students read them silently, as a class, or with a partner (mix it up). To introduce the exercise, I suggest using something really short such as a nursery rhyme. Good ones short pieces to use might be: Jack and Jill went up the hill, Little Bo Peep, Itsy Bitsy Spider, Patticake, Goldilocks, or Big Bad Wolf. Familiar movies work well for theme and setting discussion but they usually have too many events and characters for effective mini-lessons.

**Mini-Lesson: Plot**

Mini Lesson #1: Using the student’s note guide, remind students about the parts of the plot line: Exposition or basic situation, events (what is happening), high point or turning point (climax), resolution (end of story). Use the document camera to project the plot line. Choose a short nursery rhyme that everyone knows and, as a class, work through the plot line.

Mini Lesson #2: Have several rhymes available and have small groups work out their plotline on a copy of the plotline diagram. Project the plot lines and, if it will work for your class, have the groups present their timelines. Alternately, you can show each plotline and ask the groups clarifying questions.

**Mini-Lesson: Character**

Mini-lesson #1: Using one of the nursery rhymes or fairy tale stories, discuss the characters and what kind of people they are. Use something like the character analysis worksheet which has students select adjectives describing their characters and supporting their selections with events from the story. Remind students that characters don’t have to be people; they can be animals, animated objects or something like the wind or fire.

Mini-lesson #2: have sticky notes or scrap paper available on each table. Students can mark spots in their story that tell them about the character they are analyzing. Then they can fill out the worksheet after they read. Students can work alone or in a small group depending on what will work best for you class. You could also do this exercise multiple times, changing it up each time. You could also do two stories, comparing the traits of the main characters in each story.

Mini-lesson #3: Using a longer fiction piece, have students use the sticky notes or small scraps of paper, they can keep track of character traits for different characters as the story progresses. At the end of chapters or other predetermined point, students will tape or place their notes on the board or poster labeled with the character names.

**Mini-Lesson: Setting**

Mini-lesson #1: In the manner of the previous lessons, use a very short story, nursery rhyme, fable, etc., to have students describe the setting (time and place). Ask them to imagine the story happening in their head. Ask them to describe what they see. Another idea is to have them design a quick map of where the story is happening.

Mini-lesson #2: Change the time or the place and have students do a quick write on how the story would be different. This could be discussed in a small group and then written individually.

**Mini-Lesson: Theme**

Mini-Lesson #1: Go over the definition of theme or author’s message/purpose. You could use some popular movies such as “Harry Potter”, “Twilight”, or “Shrek”. Since most students will be familiar with these stories, they should be able to discuss common themes (Harry Potter—good wins over evil, friendship, compassion, working hard brings success). Ask the small groups to write their themes in complete sentences then share with class. If you have each group do the same movie, the groups can see if they came up with the same ones.

Mini-Lesson #2: Look at themes from Mini-Lesson #1 and select one or two. Change the theme, for example, “good wins over evil” could be “evil wins over good”. Have the small student groups recreate the plot of the story used in Mini-Lesson #2. If there is time, students could create a plot line with the new theme.